WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

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Category: Observations

Those who read this blog know that I'm an evangelical Christian and I believe the things that evangelicals believe. One of the distinctives of evangelicalism is a belief that people become Christians through a deliberate commitment to Jesus Christ. You can't be born a Christian and the fact that your parents, your friends or even your country are Christian doesn't make you a believer.

One of the results of this is a view that only people who have had a distinct conversion experience areÂ *realÂ* Christians and everyone else isÂ *nominal* in their faith. I am deliberately simplifying a little, but not very much. One of the outworkings of this is that you will hear evangelicals say that Christians from other traditions, such asÂ Orthodox, are notÂ *real* Christians and yet those same evangelicals mourn the persecution of their Orthodox brothers and sisters in Iraq. You can't have it both way.

I've been musing on this for a while and I'd like to make a few remarks about how I would define a Christian.

Only God Knows Who Are His. The starting point has to be that God is the only arbiter of who is and who is not a Christian. We can draw our lines where we will, but we will be wrong. One thing I am certain of is that whatever tribe of Christianity you belong to, you will meet many people from other groups in eternity - and you may be surprised at some people from your group who aren't there.

We Are Justified By Faith.Â This is one of the key teachings of the Protestant Reformation and lies at the heart of evangelical belief. We are made right with God by trusting in Jesus Christ, not by performing any actions or doing stuff. It is simple but very profound. The problem is that many evangelical believers (especially, dare I say it, of the Reformed variety) get this wrong. Their position is effectively that we are "justified by believing in justification by faith". That is, faith in Christ is replaced with assent to a particular theological principle. This automatically excludes anyone who belongs to a group who don't espouse justification by faith, whether or not they have faith. Now don't get me wrong, I believe that understanding the notion of justification by faith is a massively important part of ChristianÂ teaching and I believe that any disciple of Jesus will find their life enriched by understanding it - but you can have faith in Jesus without understanding all of the ins and outs. I have met believers from other traditions who clearly have a saving faith and who love Jesus. Yes, they do stuff that evangelicals find difficult, but they do them as a response to their faith and out of love for God - not in order to somehow earn God's favour, they know they can't do that. Obviously, not every person who claims to be a Christian really has faith - Jesus warned us that this would be the case. It's also true that some traditions make life more difficult than others - but it is faith that counts not your church stream.

You Have To Believe Some Stuff.Â There are some basic teachings of the Christian faith that anyone who claims to be a Christian needs to hold to. I would argue that this means holding to the historic creeds of the church. If someone claims to be a believer but believes things that are contrary to the Nicene or Apostolic Creeds then some serious questions could be asked. Obviously, a little

caution is needed here, because all Christians grow in their faith an understanding and new believers don't emerge with a full understanding of, say, the Trinity. Yes, I believe that Christians would be better off if they all held to an evangelical confession of faith - but that doesn't make you a believer.

You Don't Need a Conversion Experience.Â I can remember when and where I became a Christian (in a field in Northumberland in August 1974), but this sort of clarity is not essential. Some people drift into faith through a long slow process which doesn't involve a distinct point of conversion. The important thing is that they trust Christ for their salvation, not that they can sing "it was on a Monday, that somebody touched me".

We Need to be Generous. To put it simply, if you believe that Roman Catholics and Orthodox believers can't be real Christians, you are going to find heaven very uncomfortable.